

# Interview: Shauneen Furlong on the challenges inherent in making the transition to digital government

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By Democratic Audit UK

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**Shauneen Furlong** was one of the guiding lights of Canada's transition from paper-based to online government. At the 2015 CeDem conference, she spoke to Democratic Audit's Sean Kippin. In part one of this two part interview, she discussed the rationale behind the change, and the challenges she faced along the way.



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**SK: What were the guiding principles of the reform of Canadian government along digital lines when you were in post?**

That's a good question! When we started the process we wanted to work towards changing the relationship between the citizen and the government. We wanted to 'invert the paradigm', so that the way government operated was more citizen focussed, with more 'one stop shopping'. We wanted to make the government more relevant to the citizens life. That was our vision.

We also wanted to use it to promote social harmony, e-democracy and also economic sustainability. We saw the digital transformation as a force for modernisation that would facilitate our transition to the 21st century and the modern economy. This means it would not simply mean taking government as it has been since 1867 and dressing it up around the edges. We wanted to really revamp the role of the government, and reform its relationship with the citizen.

**SK: What were the key policy areas that you looked to do this in? Were there any areas in particular which**

## **lent themselves to this kind of approach?**

Hugely, yes. One of the biggest areas was taxation, and our approach in this area has been very successful. In my view that is a natural place to start given its centrality to everything government does. It affects 30 million Canadian citizens, and also all of our businesses and other organisations. Tax had always been done in a paper-based way. We were able to move a lot of that online, and doing so has been a huge success. We also wanted to change how we structured our social services. We wanted to change and amalgamate different things, and place them 'behind the secure channel' which was a system which allowed an authenticated digital signature so that each citizen could come in through a passport office, or a different government portal, in a way that allowed both them and us to take advantage of newly blended jurisdictions. This meant that a citizens local, national, and provincial digital identities could be combined in various ways.

We wanted it to be the case that different government identities could be shared in a secure way, so that if you already know my house address, the information could be updated on my drivers license, for example. But to do this properly you need to use very secure channels, so that the citizens themselves could also have access to them. Once the citizen was behind the channel, everything was authenticated and secure. This decision to attempt to share information between jurisdictions created inter-provincial challenges, as well as intra-governmental challenges.

Unfortunately, we have not been as successful inter-jurisdictionally, but we have made some progress. We have not, in my view, taken advantage of and inculcated our business processes which is where I thought we could go. I believe, and my background as a PhD in computer science, that we need to move away from silo-typed thinking. We need to use technology to transcend jurisdictional boundaries. Our departments are constitutionally based, regulation-based, we have laws based along these lines. We recognise that we have to maintain those silos to an extent administratively, but technology, if used creatively and imaginatively, in my view facilitates the breaking down of those barriers. And it has done it in a transactional way but it hasn't yet done it in a transformational way.

## **SK: Did you encounter much resistance within the system in making this transition?**

Initially when we started this a decade ago, we tried to push this initiative from underneath the government, and create bottom-up pressure to foster change. We tried to encourage citizens, but mainly employees, and particularly younger employees to push for change within the system. Unfortunately, that was not successful. We realised that people don't change until they're dissatisfied or demotivated. In fact, we found that people had a reason not to change! The individuals who we needed to persuade had careers and jobs, an individual business stream, work relationships, and they didn't want to disrupt any of that. So, we decided to persuade the Prime Minister to make an announcement that Canada would have the most connected government in the world within five years.

We found that by making a high profile public statement, and by publicly stating a target, we created an impetus and a momentum. We found that having the Prime Minister get up and say 'we are highly educated, we have a great infrastructure, lets see if we can lead the way in this field' it gave people working in government a target and by having that target we had the ammunition to work with ministers, deputy ministers, and bureaucrats, to force them to say 'now we're forcing you to work together!'.

Our aim was to integrate our governmental systems and make them interoperable so they can speak to one another. But for the individual players within the system, there was no real incentive or benefit for their data to be shared. The individual who was running the tax system had a job to make sure the tax system was run efficiently and properly. He isn't interested in whether the tax data can speak to the pension data, and whether it can speak to the military data, or be shared in any way at all. So the individual players within government kept their data separate, and of course they did so in different formats using different systems. Some of them even had legacy systems which stretched back as far as 1867, and sometimes even longer!

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**Dr. Shauneen Furlong** is an independent consultant and part-time professor who lectures with University of Toronto and University of Ottawa. She was formerly Executive Director, Government On-Line for the Government of Canada.



*This interview was carried out at the [2015 CeDem conference in Krems, Austria](#), at which Dr Furlong was a keynote speaker.*